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Liberty, 1 Of 5 Spy Ships, Kept Tabs On Mideast War

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The U.S.S. Liberty, which came under attack by Israeli planes early last month, was there to listen to coded battlefield communications of both Israel and the Arab nations, translate it almost immediately and quickly send intelligence reports to American embassies throughout the Middle East, reliable sources reported yesterday.

Although official Government spokesmen will not reveal the true mission of the vessel, listed as "technical research ship," it has been learned that it is one of five ships on duty as part of the National Security Agency's world-wide network of electronic listening posts.

Jammed With Electronic Gear
The ship was jammed with electronic equipment which made spying practically an armchair profession—until the attack which killed 34 men.

According to sources familiar

with the subject, it worked this way:

Armies, no matter of what country, must communicate. In the midst of battle, the codes they utilize are simple, and the electronic devices they use relatively free from "scramblers" to protect them for leaking information to an unknown listener.

Using equipment perfected at National Security Agency's headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., the Liberty listened in on the reports of battle and other secret communications of the warring nations.

In Excellent Position

From 15 miles offshore, it was in an excellent position to receive the radio transmissions on a wide range of frequencies, including short wave.

Trained military and civilian personnel listened to the com-

munications, both as they were picked up and on tapes made of every single reception. The tapes are still on file, having been returned to this country.

At least three men from the National Security Agency's headquarters were aboard the ship. One of them, Allen M. Blue, of the 11000 block Lockwood drive, Silver Spring, was killed in the attack.

Mathematicians and linguists, they broke the codes and translated the battlefield messages, using highly-sophisticated machines, including small, on-board computers.

Reports Sent To D.C.

Intelligence reports compiled from the information gained by the Liberty were sent back to Washington. The reports also went out from the Liberty to American posts in the troubled region, according to these sources.

The Liberty was ordered to its position at least three days before the Arab-Israeli war erupted, but the Pentagon has continued to deny it was involved in gaining intelligence.

The explanation officially given for its presence near the war zone has been that it was there to assure communications between American Government posts in the middle East and to help relay information concerning evacuation of Americans from the area.

Despite all the communications equipment aboard, it did not receive later orders from the Pentagon to move further offshore after the attack.

Reports Of Inquiry

There are reports that Israel inquired about United States ships in the area, but there is dispute over whether the query came before or after the attack.

The Liberty had been close to shore for only a brief period before the attack came, and the amount of intelligence from the battlefields gathered was not great, according to those in a position to know.

The Liberty, a converted World War II Victory ship, joined the National Security Agency's electronic snooping network about 30 months ago.

It is one of five ships which official sources list as doing "research and experiments in communications and electromagnetic radiations," all of which were converted to that

task beginning about five years ago in an effort to improve this nation's ability to listen in on what other countries are saying.

The United States places a high importance on finding out the location of military forces, radar and air base locations, and the gaining of other data, from potential enemy nations, but it is not alone in the electronic spy business.

Russian trawlers, equipped with electronic interception equipment, have been seen off Cape Kennedy and near American and British naval exercises.

There are believed to be at least ten of the trawlers, which range up to about 165 feet long.

Although the National Security Agency has remained silent on the Liberty, as it is on any other topic, sources there indicate the other four American spy ships continue to patrol close to foreign shores—some of them assigned to monitor Soviet communications.

These same sources indicate the ships have proved so successful in the past three years that National Security Agency officials are pressing for the assignment of additional vessels for spy duty.